

Promising Practices Case Study: Language Interpretation Services (Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Toronto)

The Initiative

Background: Providing language interpretation in the mental health sector has prompted diverse opinions, some arguing that it cannot be done. Cultural Interpretation Services (CIS) at CAMH, however, has been offering language interpretation services to its clients for the last 12 years. CAMH has long recognized that language barrier is significantly limiting clients' access to services. This is particularly true in light of the rise in multiculturalism and the consequent change in their clientele.

CIS acknowledges that language interpretation is critical in the mental health sector because language barrier not only affects clients with limited language proficiency but also clients who are English proficient. This is because during the course of mental illness, despite fluency in English, clients often revert to/prefer to speak in their mother tongue. Thus, there is a real need for interpreters who are trained to provide language services for clients seeking mental health specific services.

The Initiative/Model: To meet the language needs of their clients, CAMH provides rigorous in-house training and has built a roster of freelance interpreters who are fully trained and qualified to offer interpretation in the mental health sector.

Concrete Steps Taken

In order to ensure the quality of interpreters, CAMH recruits interpreters who are court and refugee board certified professional interpreters, as well as community interpreters who have passed the CILISAT/ILISAT tests. The recruited interpreters receive extensive training in mental health specific interpretation and training on diversity with diversity consultants. This mandatory training is conducted free of charge and covers topics such as: identifying, understanding and overcoming stigma surrounding mental health issues; identifying and overcoming stigma surrounding communities seeking mental health services (e.g. lesbian/gay/transgendered community); recognizing personal values, biases and emotional reactions; familiarizing with mental health specific services; tools to deal with mental health patients involved in violent crimes (e.g. clients in locked units); mental health specific lexicon, etc.

Access to resources is immensely important as it is costly not only to train mental health interpreters but also to hire them subsequently for interpretation sessions with CAMH clients. Organizationally, there is significant commitment to diversity at all levels. Senior managers are committed to the idea which results in significant funding made available for CIS. In addition, CIS has also begun to generate revenue using their roster of freelance interpreters for in-house interpreting work. Today, CAMH is proud to provide interpretation service 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Challenges

Since the sector experiences significant interpreter turnover, retaining trained and qualified interpreters is a concern for CAMH. CAMH has responded to this by paying the freelance interpreters a higher than market

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rate.

CAMH's goal to provide interpretation services 24/7 has presented some administrative challenges. Even if interpreters and funds to hire them were available, CIS needs coordinating support from other staff (such as nursing supervisors) and needs to share administrative responsibility with other divisions at CAMH.

Results/Strengths/Sustainability

Results: CIS has undoubtedly increased clients' access to quality services at CAMH. Today, staff and clients at CAMH have 24/7 access to interpreters trained in mental health specific services. They are proud to be able to meet 100% of the language needs at CAMH.

Strengths: The successes of the language interpretation initiative at CAMH can be attributed to the following key inputs: full funding, a common vision among staff, committed/dedicated upper management, appreciation of CIS staff expertise, strict program eligibility criteria for interpreters, and a revenue generating program.

Sustainability: Staff at CIS believe that since CIS is now generating revenue, it is likelier that the program will be sustainable. However, they argue that program longevity is largely contingent on sustained commitment from above in the form of funding. Consequently, they argue that the CIS model is unlikely to be replicable for an organization with funding limitations.

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